A Question to Democracy

By FAITH ADAMS

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THE GOLD STAR has disappeared from my neighbor's window, for two years have elapsed since the Armistice. The boy who went out from the house next door was the eldest of the family. I know that he died for Democracy. Yet I never saw the gold emblem that marked his sacrifice without being conscious of a vague uneasiness because I know that my neighbor's son died for something he had never known and would not have known had he lived. My neighbor is colored.

When the L——s first moved into our street in B—— they caused no small commotion. They were the only middle class colored people in our small suburban community. There are, of course, plenty of colored people beyond the railroad in Shantytown, plenty that is, to supply our needs in regard to laundresses, scrubwomen, and children's nurses, but the idea of a colored physician and his family moving into one of the best houses on Elm Street was preposterous. As the nearest prospective neighbors of the invaders, we were objects of sympathy. Our friends expected us to become the leaders of an opposition and I do not know exactly why we failed to live up to their expectations. In some ways it would have been easier, but something in me—perhaps a strain of Abolition ancestry—asserted itself in a sudden burning shame at the thought. We declined to lead a movement to make it impossible for the L——s to enter the home they had bought. But in spite of our defection they did not succeed in entering their house until a lawsuit bitterly contested at every point had been won by them in several courts. In coming, they brought with them a problem which has never been solved and which has maintained its rigid outline, through all the patriotic enthusiasm that swept away a dozen hyphens and consolidated every other element in our community during the war, a problem which persisted in spite of the Gold Star that used to hang in my neighbor's window.

The trouble encountered by the L——s was not an isolated phenomenon. It was a characteristic and attendant circumstance of every act of their lives. I wonder if any reader, whatever his or her views on the Race question, has ever paused to consider, not so much its profound and significant aspects but the comparatively simple one which finds its origin in the mere inconvenience of being a Negro in a hostile white community, especially the daily and hourly inconvenience of being that complex, highly sensitized creature, an intellectual Negro in a hostile white community. "But why do they come here?" lamented my white neighbors. "Why don't they stay with their own people?" ask those who feel that the troubles are of their own making. I believe that the answer is simple. They want the same advantages for their children that we want for ours. They moved to Elm Street to obtain those advantages in the face of antagonism, rather than live in Shantytown, or in the South from which they came, or in the crowded insanitary districts which are usually the only ones accessible to urban negroes. So far as possible in our Christian Democratic community,

we have made it impossible for them to achieve this. Of course we have not been entirely successful. We are a Northern community and there are still traces of respect for the individual's civil rights written into our laws and upheld by our courts. We have so far succeeded, however, that I, who gave no sons to my country, cannot remember the Gold Star that used to hang in my neighbor's window without a feeling of humiliation.

Primarily, the problem of my neighbors concerns their children. If America means anything to us, it means the future of our children, a future presumably freer, happier, surer than that of any children in the world. It does not mean this to the L——s. They have three children since their older boy was killed, two daughters of sixteen and ten, respectively, and a boy of eight. The second daughter, Katherine, is the one I know best. She and my ten-year-old daughter are classmates. They walk to and from school together and are friends after a fashion, and yet I know that there is not an aspect of their environments that is the same to both. The very feeling of the sun and wind on her face is a different thing to my colored neighbor's little daughter than it is to mine because she "is" colored. My ten-year-old is a tomboy. In her short vigorous life she has never stopped to think whether she was "nice" or as good as anyone else. Her speech and manners are free, emphatic, and quite devoid of grace. She tears her clothes, falls into the pond, climbs trees, walls, roofs, and anything else which can be climbed, hitches her sled on to passing teams despite emphatic warnings and stands cheerfully somewhere between the foot and the middle of her class. She goes forth unconcernedly on errands, or pursues adventurous ends of her own. She is a perfectly ordinary, very healthy and really nice child, far less talented than sensitive little Katherine, but she has never in her life been afraid or unwelcome or very unhappy. Her world has boundless horizons and endless possibilities of adventure. It may seem a small thing to you but, remembering my own childhood, there is nothing for which I am more thankful than that my children can have adventures. Our town and the world are decently safe for Elizabeth, or relatively so. She may break an arm or a leg one of these days, but I know that her heart and her spirit will not be broken. I realize that Katherine's mother does not share this security, that there is no aspect of life in our charming village that is not haunted for her by shapes of shame and terror. Each day she wakes to a dread of things unbelievably ugly from which she cannot shield her child. I know that she awaits Katherine's return from school each day in fear of seeing in the child's face that some irreparably cruel thing has happened to her.

Meanwhile Katherine's clothes are always immaculate, her ways are gentle, her speech is soft and punctiliously correct. She stands well in school and is particularly gifted in music and drawing. If the color line does not hem them in too closely, by the time she graduates my neighbors hope to send her to an art school for a year and then, perhaps, to Europe. It will take money, of course, and their means are slender, but where else, they ask passionately, can she possibly fulfill the promise that is in her.

Barbara, the older daughter, will enter college this fall. She was to have had the R—— College scholarship, awarded every year to a member of the graduating class of the High School, but as the L——s say quietly, "something happened." Something usually does happen in such cases, it seems, so they were not much surprised. Whether or not they are right,

I cannot say, but they and hundreds of colored people like them, people of sober judgment and integrity, believe that in such contests they are habitually cheated by white people. Barbara was admittedly the best student in her class. If the scholarship had been awarded according to precedent it would have gone to her as the holder of the highest general average for the entire four years, but this year the Faculty Committee departed from precedent and awarded it to Ruth H——, our minister's daughter and holder of the second highest average. Ruth's work, they said, showed more originality. Is this happy result merely a departure from hide-bound academicism and as such to be applauded or just what the L——s think it, the cheating of a sixteen-year-old child out of the fruits of four years' work? In any case, everyone was glad for Ruth, a general favorite, and her father has allowed her to accept. Barbara will enter college, of course, but she will have to work a little harder to make both ends meet. Already she is a little older, a little quieter.

And so it goes! The only one of my neighbor's children who still seems quite merry is Archie, the youngest. He is delicate and does not go to school, but studies at home with his mother. I like to see him laughing and tumbling about the lawn like any other boy of eight, but I know that if he were to venture outside the gate and a block or so down the street, he would find the hereditary enemy lying in wait for him. He did venture once, and his mother had to explain to him when he came back bruised and troubled why the white boys called him names and threw things at him. They weren't "tough" boys either, nor members of the white gangs that the L——s moved from the city to avoid, but the nice little sons of some of our leading citizens. When they discussed the invasion of the L——s at home and abroad in loud and angry tones, those same citizens did not intend to suggest to their sons that it was a good game to hunt down Archie, but somehow the boys have learned that he is an intruder and so in the good old tribal fashion transmitted by their parents, they threw stones and shouted "nigger." Archie never goes out alone now and Katherine usually goes to school with Elizabeth. "It's a little safer for a girl!" Mrs. L—— says wistfully. Just how safe it is, I know from what Elizabeth has told me of the jeers that Katherine daily endures. It is Elizabeth, and not Katherine, who resents those jeers and who, on occasions, puts Katherine's tormentors to flight, while Katherine walks on quietly, "just as if she didn't care!"

You see, Katherine is not only a little ten-year-old girl; she is a representative of her race, and so are all the L——s. The freedom and unconsciousness of normal, happy childhood are not for her, as they were not for Barbara and as they will not long be for Archie. Compared with her, how robust and spontaneous my Elizabeth seems. Elizabeth can forget herself. This is just what Katherine can not do. Her shrinking self-consciousness is a distressing thing. But even if she could lose herself in work or play, how quickly she would be forced to remember. Alone, Katherine might perhaps forget for a moment that she is colored, but the world about her never forgets. To that world she is colored first, and a child with a child's needs afterwards.

As it is with the children, it is with their elders in a far greater degree. They, too, are the representatives of their race first, human beings only secondarily. Just what this means in actual nervous strain, if in no other

way, is a difficult thing for any of those who belong to the dominant race to estimate. It means eternal vigilance and eternal self-consciousness. It means doubt, hesitation and never-ending complications in the most commonplace incidents of daily living. It means, even under such favorable conditions as obtain in B——, a constant uncertainty of life, health and happiness. How great a gift my own careless certainty of a very few elementary things now seems to me! In particular the certainty I have of meeting in the ordinary walks of life with ordinary courtesy, decency and fair play; of always meeting in an emergency with deep kindliness, dormant before perhaps, but called into being by nothing more than my need of it; my certainty of fellowship, of equality, of respect if it is due me; my certainty of getting pretty generally anything which I honestly work or pay for and sometimes more than this, and of foretelling the morrow with some accuracy and laying my plans accordingly for myself and my children. Can you imagine being able to take none of these things for granted? If you can, your imagination serves you better than most in trying to realize what daily life means to the L——s.

In one of our "high-brow" monthlies, an American woman wrote recently of her readiness to kill in defense of what "middle class America" meant to her. It meant just such a safe, sure, happy freedom from dependence on the irrational and violent in human nature as it does to me. It does not mean this to the L——s, and yet they, too, are of "middle class America." They give it their passionate loyalty and hold it to be good, except in so far as it excludes them or others because of race, creed or color—a loyalty which is constantly and tragically betrayed by the reality, while my own "weaker" faith in its institutions is constantly being justified. Do you think I am exaggerating? Then consider for a moment these parallels in the lives of two middle-class Americans, Mrs. L. and myself.

If I want to go away for the hot weather, all I have to do is to look up some jolly mountain or seashore spot within my means, pack my bags and go. Mrs. L. cannot do this. Of all the wealth and loveliness of our natural resources, the greater part is closed to her. Hotels, boarding houses, and camps are almost entirely in the hands of white people who exclude colored ones. There are a few, a very few, resorts for colored people but they are generally crowded and not always desirable. To rent or buy a summer cottage, however simple, is difficult and expensive. Too many white people refuse to have colored neighbors! Long trips are not to be thought of because it is necessary to depend on hotel and sleeping-car accommodations. Just once, in the flush of youth, Dr. and Mrs. L. did attempt a trip. They took their oldest children to see Niagara and the Great Lakes. The experience was one they have never cared to repeat. So the L——s spend the summer in sunbaked B——. There are worse hardships, of course, and yet why should the desirable thing which for me is so simple, that is, to give Elizabeth the wild freedom of the woods or an outing at the beach for two months each year, be impossible for them? They do spend a few days sometimes in a small colored hotel at a glittering resort on the Jersey coast, but they do not call it "taking their children to the country," and neither, I think, would you.

Again, let us say that a member of my family is stricken suddenly with a serious illness, or requires an immediate operation. It is a hard time and an anxious one, but how comparatively smooth and simple my

course will be. I speak as a representative of middle-class America who can pay more or less for what she needs, and leave aside for the moment all question of economic injustice. My family physician will make all arrangements. I have my choice of the best doctors, the best private accommodation, the best nurses I can afford, and I will be pretty sure of sympathetic interest and helpfulness from all with whom I come in contact. When Barbara L—— was suddenly stricken with appendicitis, there was not a hospital, public or private in B——, or in the nearest big town, where she could get a room. They finally rushed her to the nearest big hospital and took their chances in the ward, already overcrowded, knowing that for the urgent care she needed, they had to depend upon overworked, indifferent nurses, and doctors in an institution which excluded colored people as doctors, nurses, or private patients. "It's when you're in a hurry that being colored really matters" was Mrs. L's comment on this occasion. These serious discriminations have their more trivial counterparts in almost every incident in our daily lives. If I wish to go down town to shop or for any other purpose, it is a simple matter. I can be served with reasonable promptness and civility in any store I see fit to enter, while Mrs. L. may be obliged to wait indefinitely or be ignored altogether by saleswomen who do not like her complexion. If I cannot get home to luncheon I eat downtown at the first tea-room or dairy lunch that comes to hand. Once when Mrs. L. was delayed beyond the noon hour, she tried to get food in three or four such places and, failing to obtain service in any of them, finally lunched on a bar of chocolate in the public square. It is possible that she would eventually have been served had she persisted. There is a law on the statute books covering such cases, but she preferred an unsatisfactory luncheon and her subsequent headache to further rebuffs. Again, if a good concert or a good play comes to town, I take Elizabeth as a matter of course. She has not so far evidenced any great enthusiasm for the concerts. Mrs. L. does not take Katherine, who is really musical and would love to go, because she can never be sure that the tickets she buys, or perhaps reserves by telephone, will really be honored. If they are for the gallery, the chances are that they will be, but even this is not a certainty. Besides she does not always want to sit in the gallery. You and I could do this with no feeling of discomfort. It is a part of our white freedom that we can, but then we have never been segregated into galleries or winced under the phrase "nigger heaven."

For our freedom is far more than the freedom from unpleasant occurrences. It is freedom from the expectation of such occurrences; from the constant apprehension of unfairness and of hostility or condescension in those we meet. It is freedom from the constant necessity of being on the defensive, of living forever isolated in a lonely little hell of self-consciousness. It is the priceless freedom of the mind and it contains the possibility of a fellowship as wide as the world. I cannot believe that even the close bond of suffering which unites those we exclude from it compensates them for its loss. That there are some compensations cannot be denied. Their lives gain in intensity. They know race loyalty and kinship and pride such as few of us even dream, and also sometimes practice detachment and irony to a degree few of us suspect, but surely these are shadowy substitutes for the whole of life. To live warped and ingrowing, however intensely, however sustained by pride, or irony, or the sense of having a cause, is not a substitute, it seems to me, for living fully and freely and to the limit of our powers

The war which cut so sharply across our lives, obliterating race and class lines, once seemed about to wipe out even the barriers which separated the L——s from the rest of us. We were all Americans with a common cause—Democracy. In the name of Democracy we drafted black and white Americans impartially and sent them out to die. We taught them both to make sacrifices, to work and fight and save. We sold them both Liberty Bonds and Thrift Stamps and urged on both alike the need of wartime effort and economy. But there Democracy ended. It drafted Robert L——. It has since taken his life. But it excluded his mother from the workrooms of the Red Cross organization in B—— just as it has excluded and separated colored people the country over in every kind of war and war relief work. Democracy does not mean social equality, I may be told at this point, and there are many whose chosen work it seems to be to popularize this misconception. But if it does not mean equality, it means nothing. We did not knowingly go out to fight for "Democracy-within-caste-limits." It is not an inspiring slogan. Certainly it was not for such a qualified Democracy that Robert L—— and other young colored Americans died. What they really died for, I do not know. Neither do I know what of faith or despair or necessity drove them to their death in the American Forces. But I do see in the memory of my colored neighbor's Gold Star the most insistent question that has yet been put to our Democracy.

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